

Elisha's Curse of the She-Bears

Joseph Fessenden
SS 503 – Sacred Scripture: The Prophets
Nathan Eubank, Ph.D.
November 24, 2014

I promise that I read this paper out-loud to myself at least once all the way through and fixed every error and infelicity that I found.

I. Introduction

An oft-cited critique of Sacred Scripture, especially the Old Testament, is that the God of the Bible does not seem to match the description of Him given in later theology. One example that easily falls to this sort of caricature is the prophet Elisha's encounter with the boys from Bethel who, for the crime of mocking his receding hairline, are mauled by bears at the summoning of the prophet. Such is the superficial reading of this story as found in 2 Kings 23:25. However, as with any story in Scripture, this text was included for a reason, even if that reason is difficult to discern. This endeavor to uncover the meaning and purpose of this story will first look at scholarly discourse on interpretive questions then examine how this passage has been used and interpreted within the life and magisterium of the Church. This discussion will focus on three questions. First, it will attempt to determine why Elisha took this trip and for what reason it is recounted in Scripture. Next, it will look to understand if Elisha's curse actively summoned the she-bears and why he may have been moved to do so. Finally, this paper will examine why the boys were punished so disproportionately to their crime since mauling seems a severe punishment for childish teasing, especially to the modern reader. It must be noted from the outset that, as with any discourse, there is significant interrelation between each of these questions, so some discussion will necessarily overlap each question.

II. Why did Elisha take this trip, and why is this event recounted in Scripture?

It seems that the only reason for including this account of Elisha's visit to Mount Carmel is to recount this tale, which, on its surface, shows the prophet in a negative light. James A. Montgomery and Henry Snyder Gehman refer to the passage as a "*Bubenmärchen* to frighten the

young into respect for their reverend elders.”¹ It is their belief that the story may represent such a traumatic event in common memory that coincided with the prophet’s visit, but the relationship between the two is manufactured for didactic purposes. They further support this claim by the observation that the number forty-two seems to add realism through detail, but is more likely a symbolic number which is used elsewhere in Scripture as an ill-omened number. The common examples of this are found in 2 Kings 10:14 and Revelation 11:2; 13:5.² Charles Conroy and John Gray share this interpretation.³ Gray takes this argument a step further by asserting that the story is “a puerile tale [that] serves as a gauge of the moral level of the dervish communities from which the strictly hagiographical matter in the Elisha cycle emanated.”⁴ Gwilym Jones joins Gray, noting that, “it cannot have a serious point and it does no credit to the prophet.”⁵ Such a dismissive approach, while not infrequently used to handle such dark passages in scripture, is unbecoming to the Christian approaching Scripture, as is pointed out by Pope Benedict XVI.⁶ Rather, an approach that acknowledges both the historicity of the events recounted in the text and seeks to understand those events within the context of their time is necessary.

One possible interpretation of this passage focuses on its position in Elisha’s ministry as a whole. This event is introduced at a key moment on two axes: Elisha’s ministry as a whole and the preceding miracle of cleansing the water of Jericho. On the first cycle, that of Elisha’s prophetic ministry taken as a whole, this encounter takes place immediately after the assumption

¹ James Alan Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*, ed. Henry Snyder Gehman, International Critical Commentary Series (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), 355.

² *Ibid.*, 356.

³ Charles. Conroy, *1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings: With an Excursus on Davidic Dynasty and Holy City Zion* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1983), 199; John Gray, *I & II Kings A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), 428.

⁴ Gray, *I & II Kings A Commentary*, 428.

⁵ Gwilym H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings: Based on the Revised Standard Version*, vol. 2, New century Bible commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich. : London: W.B. Eerdmans ; Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984), 389.

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Verbum Domini* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2010), 42.

of Elijah; for the first time, Elisha is now the prophet instead of the apprentice serving Elijah. Elisha has now fully taken the mantle of his master. Montgomery-Gehman assert that the only reason Elisha would make this trek to Carmel is if that mountain is a place of pilgrimage⁷; however, it should be noted that Carmel was also the site of Elijah's dramatic encounter with the prophets of Baal. Hence, this pilgrimage should recall Elisha walking in his master's footsteps and taking for himself the title of prophet. Such a conclusion is implied by Choon Leong Seow.⁸

Another possible, and perhaps probable, interpretation is shared by Conroy, Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, and Seow. They interpret this story in light of the immediately previous account of Elisha cleansing the waters of Jericho. Like Moses and Elijah before him, Elisha's prophetic ministry can be the source of blessings, as in his miracle of the waters of Jericho or disaster and death, as in this story. Peter Leithart echoes this mindset and offers a three-layer typographical relationship wherein Moses is a type of both Elijah and John the Baptist and Joshua is a type of both Elisha and Christ. He also observes that the cities mentioned in the pilgrimage leading to Elijah's assumption each reflect part of Joshua's campaign to conquer the lands of Canaan. While this draws out the typology significantly, it is not without merit, if only devotionally.⁹

In any case, it can be noted with Cogan-Tadmor that this story at the transition between the stories of Elijah and Elisha serves to cement Elisha's claim as a true prophet.¹⁰ Hence, although superficially, the story sounds like little more than a fable, rejecting it as limited to such

⁷ Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*, 356.

⁸ Choon Leong Seow, *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books.*, vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 178.

⁹ Peter J. Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2006), 171–172.

¹⁰ Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, eds., *II Kings: A New Translation*, 1st ed., The Anchor Bible v. 11 (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1988), 39.

a reading is unworthy of the text. As with most texts in Sacred Scripture, it was not included in the tradition unworthily or arbitrarily.

III. Did Elisha summon the bears and was it merely to defend his pride in the face of superficial insult?

The next question that this examination proposes to investigate is whether Elisha instigated the bear attack and, if so, why he summoned the she-bears. The sources that disregard the historicity of this story also reject the notion that such an event would ever be instigated by a prophet of God. Raymond Calkins asserts that this is “merely an example of a premoral exhortation to respect the prophets as holy men of God...[which] will not stand examination from any moral point of view.”¹¹ Jones, presumably building on the assumption above that this represents two stories combined for pedagogical purposes, considers Elisha’s curse to be “a later accretion...[which], unworthy as it is, has found its way into the present version of the narrative.”¹² Gray builds on the same assumption by observing that if “Elisha invoked the name of Yahweh to curse the boys, with such terrible consequences, [it] is derogatory to the great public figure and borders on blasphemy.”¹³ Indeed, if Elisha’s curse was as petty and vindictive as it appears, it reflects poorly, not only on him, but also on the God whom he represents.

Rather than a reading that either flatly rejects the historicity of the event because it appears unbecoming or views it as evidence of a prophet wielding his power and authority as a bully on small children, it is imperative to look for a reason he may have done this which fits into the overall story of salvation history. Frequently, difficulty with this passage seems to arise from viewing the taunts of the boys as a schoolyard insult. These discussions seem to fall into three

¹¹ Raymond Calkins, *The Interpreter’s Bible: The Holy Scriptures King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exigesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, vol. 3 (New York;Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952), 197.

¹² Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, 2:390.

¹³ Gray, *I & II Kings A Commentary*, 429.

categories. Some assert Elisha wore a tonsure as a mark of his prophetic office, and the boys were taunting that office. Others stand on the understanding of Nazarite law forbidding ritual shaving of the head, and claim that Elisha was simply naturally bald or balding on the crown of his head; they frequently also point out that his baldness was not from leprosy or some other skin disease but a natural state. Finally, some sources point out that baldness was a simple insult among the Greeks and Romans that does not necessarily imply any observation or require a basis in fact; it would not be entirely unreasonable to apply the same assumption here.¹⁴ In the latter two cases, the boys are simply teasing Elisha as boys are wont to do, and the taunts are unrelated to his office as prophet.

There are several arguments against each of these positions. First of all, as a traveler on a pilgrimage, Elisha almost certainly would have had his head covered,¹⁵ so it would have been difficult for the boys to see either natural baldness or tonsure. It is true that, because of other marks of his office, specifically the mantle he received from Elijah, the tonsure could have been assumed based on his identity as a prophet, and this seems assumed by Gray and Seong, although the latter goes on to say that any interpretation of a deeper meaning is mere speculation.¹⁶ Cogan-Tadmor flatly reject the idea of tonsure, however. “Lengthy hair rather than close-shaving of the head, was an accepted feature of asceticism as is reflected in the Nazirite law in Num 6:5.”¹⁷ In fact, according to the Law, the priests were forbidden any ritual hair cutting (Lev 21:5); while Elisha was, properly speaking, a prophet rather than a priest, it seems unlikely that prophets would adopt a custom that the Law indicates is displeasing to God. Finally, his shaved

¹⁴ Calkins, *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Scriptures King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exigesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, 3:197.

¹⁵ Gray, *I & II Kings A Commentary*, 429; Jones, *I and 2 Kings*, 2:390.

¹⁶ Gray, *I & II Kings A Commentary*, 429; Seow, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 3:178.

¹⁷ Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, 38.

head could express mourning the death of Elijah rather than tonsure, but this also is forbidden in the Law (Deut 14:1).

If the story as conveyed in the Scripture is to be taken for what it expresses in the text itself, it must be accepted that the event did happen in a way at least recognizably as a historical event. Furthermore, divorcing the two aspects of this story into unrelated events that exist solely for didactic or manipulative purposes does not appropriately respect the text of Sacred Scripture. Therefore, it is fitting to acknowledge this interaction between Elisha and the boys of Bethel to have occurred, and it is appropriate to hold that, at some level Elisha was responsible for the bears' action against the boys. However, reconciling bear mauling as a punishment for childish teasing remains problematic.

IV. Was the boys' punishment, mauling by bears, proportionate to the crime they had committed?

If Elisha's curse did in fact summon the she-bears to punish the boys, then it is clearly unfitting to imply that the attack was merely to assuage Elisha's hurt pride at being called bald. It seems even a stretch to hold that the attack was to defend Elisha's God to whom insults on him redounded. Such difficulties frequently have left commentators in a position of rejecting the story as a whole as "pre-moral exhortation to respect the prophets"¹⁸ or "a cautionary tale" which is "fictitious in its details."¹⁹ Others have proposed solutions that reconcile this tension. The most compelling either interpret Elisha's antagonists' taunts as far more severe and premeditated and vicious or situate Elisha's action in the context of a prophetic action of the same type Jesus

¹⁸ Calkins, *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Scriptures King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exigesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, 3:197.

¹⁹ Conroy, *1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings*, 391.

would enact when he cleanses the Temple rather than an outburst of temper as many view both acts.

One detail that is noted is that the common image of young boys mocking an old man may be misdirected. Rather, it seems that the Hebrew term, נָעָר, that is employed may refer to young men rather than small boys. This term, of itself, “can refer to a person up to marriageable age.”²⁰ The same root is translated elsewhere in the same scriptural translation as servant, man, young man, and youth, in addition to the younger implication of boy or child. The Hebrew נָעָר combined with the modifier קָטָן does indeed frequently imply young boys, but, this, קָטָן נָעָר, is the same term used by Solomon when he responds to God’s offer to grant him any gift, “I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in.” (1Ki 3:7) Clearly, this is not absolute evidence of the meaning of the text, but it does show that, in at least one other instance in the same text, the term is used to indicate ignorance and childishness rather than youth. Mercer considers the fact that this group seemed to be organized and “came out of the city” (2Ki 2:23) for the purpose of harassing Elisha rather than children at play who happened upon the prophet as further evidence for this theory.²¹

In addition, the meaning of the imperative in the Hebrew is unclear. It is translated into English as “go away” (NRSV) and “go up” (RSVCE) and other variants. If the NRSV translation is taken as accurate, then this exchange depicts the young men of Bethel openly rejecting and taunting God in the person of His prophet. In that reading, the punishment they receive is not unusual in Sacred Scripture.

²⁰ Victor P. Hamilton, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 3:125 in Mark K. Mercer, “Elisha’s Unbearable Curse: A Study of 2 Kings 2:23-25,” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 21, no. 2 (January 1, 2002): 172.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 172–173; Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 175.

Another approach reflects on the fact that Bethel, where this encounter is situated, is the site of the idol erected by King Jeroboam I. This interpretation combines the presence of this pagan shrine with the RSVCE translation of the imperative, “go up.” Rather than being sent away from the city, the prophet is being taunted and tempted to worship at Jeroboam’s idolatrous shrine. This approach is proposed by Mercer and Seow.²²

Leithart starts with this same taunt and takes it a step further. In his reconstruction, the young men are neither children nor a simple cadre organized to taunt the prophet. Instead, they were priests, “Levites” devoted to the golden calf idol erected by Jeroboam I. “Elisha’s curse is an act of warfare, a Joshua-like attack on a center of idolatry.”²³

Seow offers a final note that the attempt to situate this story in an ethical framework is misguided, and perhaps doomed, from the outset:

Elisha’s response seems vindictive, petty, and morally unjustifiable. The passage provides no paradigm of righteous conduct, however. Ethics is not at issue. The point, rather, is a theological one. Read in tandem with the preceding episode concerning a salvific act wrought in the name of God, it points to a dialectical understanding of the character of God. The sovereign deity is free to save and to punish, to bless and to curse, to give life and to take it away. It was probably on account of such an understanding of the sovereignty of God that Jesus rebuked his disciples who wanted, like Elijah, to call down fire from heaven to punish those who rejected their master. It is entirely up to God to bless or to curse.

Hence, in the view of the editors of that volume, the question of proportion between crime and punishment, the question of the ethical nature of the attack, is moot; it situates the passage in a framework in which it was not meant to be read.

²² Mercer, “Elisha’s Unbearable Curse,” 175; Seow, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 3:178.

²³ Leithart, *1 & 2 Kings*, 175.

V. How has this passage been approached in the Living Tradition of the Church?

In two millennia of Christianity, this particular passage from the lives of the prophets has seen little comment. It has been used as an example of just punishment of God on a few occasions, but there has been scant explication offered by the Fathers and great writers of the Christian age. This section will recount some of this text's applications within the Living Tradition and some key events that have found this passage valuable as an example or explanation.

Augustine took up the question of why the youths emerged to taunt Elisha. In this, he asserts that the “insolent boys” acted not only with the permission, but at the behest of their parents. It seems clear that Augustine does not share the interpretation of the Hebrew terms that would identify the taunting youths as young men rather than boys. In his estimation, they are merely serving the twisted desires of their parents, and they are punished to teach those same parents a lesson. In his words, the children were mauled “that the elders might receive a lesson through the smiting of the little ones, and the death of the sons might be a lesson to the parents; and that they might learn to fear the prophet, whom they would not love, notwithstanding the wonders which he performed.”²⁴

Augustine also reflects on Elisha's encounter with the youth of Bethel as he reflects on the content of the Psalm 47, Augustine interprets the children of Bethel as a type of the Jews who called for the crucifixion of Christ. Just as the Jews cried out, as if with one voice, “crucify him,” so before them, the boys of Bethel mocked the prophet Elisha in one voice, “Go up.” In Augustine's view, to mock the cross of Christ is to ask for the same punishment that befell the boys who taunted Elisha. The difficulty of reading this account in an ethical context is, to some

²⁴ Augustine, *Sermo 204 de Tempore* in Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles*, vol. 3, Commentary on the Old Testament (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 212.

extent, removed by this understanding, which situates it in the realm of typology rather than in the realm of just punishment for a fault; as Augustine says, the extreme punishment is “not so much in cruelty as in mystery.”²⁵

Tertullian uses this passage as an example in his own corpus opposing Marcion. He looks to it as an example of a natural evil to punish the wicked, that is penal, rather than criminal, evil. He includes this matter in his discussion of God’s just punishments for idolatry and ingratitude.²⁶

Finally, it bears mentioning that, in at least one instance, this passage was used to defend erroneous interpretations of Scripture and faulty applications of the spiritual life. In the late 17th century, Michael de Molinos, in spreading the Quietist movement, identified this passage as a sinful act produced against the active will of God, yet allowed by his permissive will, and perhaps against the will of Elisha. In the writings of Molinos, this could be seen as “violence...immediately executed by God or by the minister of demons.”²⁷ This was rejected by the Holy Office and the Constitution, *Coelestis Pastor* in 1687,²⁸ but it is illustrative of how carefully such passages in Sacred Scripture must be approached.

VI. Conclusion

It is possible, and correct, to say with Montgomery that “*Bubenmärhen* to frighten the young into respect for their reverend elders.”²⁹ The simple fact that it does read as such, however, does not force the reader to join Jones when he asserts, “it cannot have a serious point

²⁵ Philip Schaff, ed., *Saint Augustin: Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 8, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 1 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), 164.

²⁶ Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, vol. 3, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 308.

²⁷ Henry Denzinger and Karl Rahner, eds., *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1954), 336.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 331.

²⁹ Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*, 355.

and it does no credit to the prophet.”³⁰ This passage cannot be disregarded as a product of the backward moral state of the communities that wrote this passage nor does it do justice to the text or the Church to manufacture fanciful interpretations to defend God and His prophet from criticism. It must be admitted with Seow³¹ that each explanation that is offered to fully justify it invites many challenges, and no single interpretation is sufficient to justify the account to a modern morality with certitude or any level of absolute confidence.

At the same time, there are several potential solutions to approaching this piece of Sacred Scripture without disregarding it or rationalizing it beyond recognition. An argument can certainly be made and defended that the boys who were the victims of the prophet’s curse were not children at play, but rather young men who had gathered for the purpose of taunting, mocking, and ridiculing the prophet of God. It stands to reason, especially given the ferocious reprisal and the improbability that the boys would have been aware of the condition of Elisha’s hair, that the taunts were not aimed at something so mundane, but rather, they were intended to redound to God or to encourage his prophet to an idolatrous sacrifice. Neither of these conclusions is able to perfectly withstand extended scrutiny and challenge, but they are certainly plausible within the text that is available and the social context of the period.

³⁰ Jones, *1 and 2 Kings*, 2:389.

³¹ Seow, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 3:178.

Bibliography

- Attridge, Harold W., Wayne A. Meeks, and Jouette M. Bassler. *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006.
- Benedict XVI. *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Verbum Domini*. Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2010.
- Calkins, Raymond. *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Scriptures King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exigesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*. Vol. 3. 12 vols. New York;Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952.
- Cogan, Mordechai, and Hayim Tadmor, eds. *II Kings: A New Translation*. 1st ed. The Anchor Bible v. 11. Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1988.
- Conroy, Charles. *1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings: With an Excursus on Davidic Dynasty and Holy City Zion*. Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1983.
- Denzinger, Henry, and Karl Rahner, eds. *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*. Translated by Roy J. Deferrari. St. Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Co., 1954.
- Gray, John. *I & II Kings A Commentary*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963.
- Jones, Gwilym H. *1 and 2 Kings: Based on the Revised Standard Version*. Vol. 2. 2 vols. New century Bible commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich. : London: W.B. Eerdmans ; Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984.
- Keil, Carl Friedrich, and Franz Delitzsch. *1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles*. Vol. 3. Commentary on the Old Testament. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996.
- Leithart, Peter J. *1 & 2 Kings*. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible. Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2006.
- Mercer, Mark K. "Elisha's Unbearable Curse: A Study of 2 Kings 2:23-25." *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 21, no. 2 (January 1, 2002): 165–198.
- Montgomery, James Alan. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*. Edited by Henry Snyder Gehman. International Critical Commentary Series. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951.
- Roberts, Alexander, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*. Vol. 3. The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885.
- Schaff, Philip, ed. *Saint Augustin: Expositions on the Book of Psalms*. Vol. 8. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 1. New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888.

Seow, Choon Leong. *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. Vol. 3. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.

Simon, Uriel, and Lenn J. Schramm. *Reading Prophetic Narratives*. Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.